

## ESSAYS: ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND MISSIONARIES

### “THE MOST PERFECT IDEA OF A GREEK CITY THAT ANY WHERE EXISTS”: ASSOS, ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND AMERICAN IDEOLOGIES

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In the spring of 1800, the young and intrepid William Martin Leake journeyed the coast of Asia Minor, stopping at the ancient citadel of Assos. His brief but evocative description captures the essence of the place:

The ruins of Assos, at Behrem Kalesi, opposite Molivo, the ancient Methymna in Mytilene. The ruins are extremely curious. There is a theater in very perfect preservation; there are also the remains of several temples, at one of which are figures in low relief, in a very ancient style of art, sculptured upon the hard granite of Mount Ida, which forms the materials of many of the buildings. On the western side of the city the remains of the walls and towers, with a gate, are in complete preservation; without the walls is seen the cemetery, with numerous sarcophagi, some of which are of gigantic dimensions, still standing in their places, and an ancient causeway leading to the gate. The whole gives, perhaps, the most perfect idea of a Greek city that anywhere exists.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the ideal city Aristotle outlined in Book 7 of the *Politics* bears striking similarity to the physical setting and urban plan of Assos, where, perhaps not coincidentally, he lived between 348 and 345 BC.

Despite its paradigmatic setting and dynamic plan, there is a tension in the fabric of the city that Leake captures in his opening and closing remarks: “The ruins are extremely curious,” and “the whole gives, perhaps, the most perfect idea of a Greek city that any where exists.” This oscillation between the novel and the paradigmatic goes straight to the heart of why Assos captured the attention of nineteenth-century travelers and why it became the first

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<sup>1</sup> Leake 1820, 253-55; Leake 1824, 128-29.

site of excavations of the nascent Archaeological Institute of America. The dichotomy continues to be what fascinates us in Assos to this day. Since we can only recover the past within the frame of our present, I aim to explore not only early travelers' accounts of Assos and the challenges and accomplishments of the first American investigators there, but also to probe how some of the underlying theoretical, ideological, and political concerns that motivated their actions and drove their enterprise have pursued us into the twenty-first century. These concerns include the theoretical underpinnings of the design of the Doric order and the propriety of its decoration, the political role of archaeology in culture and nation-building, and the value of reconstruction, both on paper and in "real life," so to speak. In this discussion, the splendid and notorious Temple of Athena, set within the ideally framed city, takes center stage.

Antiquarians before Leake knew of Assos. In 1677, the Englishman John T. Covell, chaplain to Sir James Harvey, the ambassador of Charles II to the Sublime Porte, described the lower city in quite accurate detail but lamented that the inhabitants would not allow him into the upper city.<sup>2</sup> Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul Gouffier, French nobleman and ambassador to the Porte, passed by Assos in 1785 while making his picturesque geographical survey, lingering only long enough to experience the beauty of the landscape and to form a rather poetic impression of the great tumble of monuments.<sup>3</sup>

The trickle of visitors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries turned into a veritable flood in the early years of the nineteenth century. While the Napoleonic wars limited access to Italy, the English victories in Egypt and the Levant opened opportunities for European antiquarians in the eastern Mediterranean. These travelers were not all gentleman scholars; Leake, for example, was connected with the military. They represented a wider

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<sup>2</sup> Covell 1677.

<sup>3</sup> Choiseul Gouffier 1809, 86-88.

range of explorer and their accounts reached a broader audience.<sup>4</sup> Their various descriptions of Assos—be they the broadly synthetic English perspectives of William Martin Leake, Dr. Leigh Hunt, or Sir Charles Fellows, the highly precise inventories of German antiquarians Otto Friedrich von Richter, Anton Prokesch von Osten, and the Polish Count Eduard Raczyński, or the richly imaginative account of the French correspondent Jean Joseph Francois Poujoulat—all share the general sense of being simultaneously impressed by the beauty and quantity of the remains at Assos and, in part, by their strangeness.<sup>5</sup>

Sir Charles Fellows captures the general sentiment in a passage he writes after describing the breathtaking view from the akropolis:

Immediately around me were the ruins, extending for miles, undisturbed by any living creature except the goats and kids. On every side lay columns, triglyphs, and friezes, of beautiful sculpture, every object speaking of the grandeur of this ancient city. In one place I saw thirty Doric capitals placed up in a line for a fence. I descended towards the sea, and found the whole front of the hill a wilderness of ruined temples, baths, and theaters, all of the best workmanship, but all of the same grey stone as the neighboring rock.

And then his next sentence:

The annexed plate will show one of the friezes, the subject of which I cannot understand or describe.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the most confounding and intriguing feature of the ancient city for all visitors prior to 1838 was the sculpture strewn about the acropolis (fig. 1). These sculptures were, in Leake's assessment, curious, and to echo the words of Alice in Wonderland, they only became curiouser and curiouser with further investigation. Sir Charles Fellows capitulates most dramatically, but in fact all the early visitors did not know quite what to make of the sculptures. Archaic architectural sculpture was hardly known at the time; within a limited frame of reference, antiquarians did their best to identify the sculpture as either "most ancient" or "in the Egyptian style."

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<sup>4</sup> Dyson 2006, 65-85; Malcolm Wagstaff, "Colonel Leake: Traveler and Scholar," in Seawright and Wagstaff 2001, 3-16.

<sup>5</sup> Wescoat forthcoming.

<sup>6</sup> Fellows 1839, 47-48.

Nor could early investigators quite come to grips with the position of the reliefs. They understood that “these fragments have probably composed the frieze of a granite temple which has stood on this citadel.”<sup>7</sup> Knowing the temple to be Doric, travelers occasionally called the sculptures metopes, but more often they referred to them simply as bas-reliefs. French architect, Jean-Nicolas Huyot, who visited the site in 1817, proposed that the reliefs belonged to “the interior of the portico.”<sup>8</sup> One assumes he had in mind the Parthenon or the Hephaisteion in Athens.

The early scholars found it sufficiently challenging just to inventory the reliefs. The animals—fighting bulls, attacking lions, and crouching sphinxes—were recognizable, but the reliefs with humans were more difficult to apprehend. The descriptions range from the imaginatively picturesque to the clinically specific. The condition and disposition of the sculpture must have created part of the challenge. The descriptions suggest the fragments of reliefs were juxtaposed in confusing ways on the ground and built into the walls of the latest fortification. The relief that confounded Fellows caused problems for others as well. Hunt, for example, describes “a procession to sacrifice; there are three naked figures with their arms extended marching in the same direction; and another looking back at them.” Huyot’s description of a “ceremony with Egyptian priests” must refer to the same relief, which seems to be the left half of relief that we now identify as Herakles wrestling Triton (A3), which was broken through the torso of Herakles. Otto Friedrich von Richter, visiting the site in June of 1816, describes again a relief with three forward striding figures with outstretched hands, but then he notes a fourth figure holds out something that looks like a cup. Could the left fragment of the symposion relief (A4) have been in close proximity?

For Jean Joseph Francois Poujoulat, the issue was not recovering the past, but rather using it as a point of departure for a largely imaginary but highly engaging narrative.<sup>9</sup> The

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<sup>7</sup> Hunt 1817, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Huyot 1817, 47-52.

<sup>9</sup> Poujoulat 1834.

left half of the relief A4 could be the inspiration for his description of women who “advance in step, one behind the other, clapping their hands or frolicking together on either carpets or grass.” But it might also have inspired his description: “a woman covered in clothing resembling the costume of women of the Orient is seated facing the bed; behind her are four women standing in front of a great urn; one of them is casting off her clothing.” Eliminating the seated woman, the description appears to be again a conflation of the symposion and Triton reliefs. Poujoulat imagines that “here women indolently outstretched on beds or devans, present their cups to slaves who pour drinks for them, while their long hair, which is their only clothing, floats negligently on their shoulders.” But in his observation, “I saw two women, placed one facing the other, whose lower part terminated in a fishtail,” he is the only early traveler to attempt to recover the meaning of the central section of this relief. Poujoulat finds rich content in the right-hand fragment of the symposion: “I have recognized in the middle of a heap of ruins, a family scene, representing a dropsical man with an enormous head and flanks, seated on an elevated bed; next to the bed is a man with a long beard, who offers the sick one a beverage.”

Poujoulat’s antithesis comes in the German aristocrat Anton Prokesch von Osten, who provides a concise and thorough inventory of reliefs (which he calls metopes) visible during his visit in 1826, noting the condition and position of the reliefs, providing a list of the scenes with oxen, centaurs, lion combats, and sphinxes and describing in greater detail the two fragments of the banquet (A4) and the left side of relief A3. Only his description of a “seated Eros, who rests his hand on a bow” finds no parallel in the surviving fragments.<sup>10</sup>

Prokesch von Osten made highly accurate descriptions and measurements of several of the other monuments at Assos, but it was the French, inspired by the colourful accounts of Choiseul Gouffier and Poujoulat, as well as the more discerning investigation of Huyot, who undertook the first formal investigation of the site in June 1835. They worked under the

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<sup>10</sup> Prokesch von Osten 1837, 380-402.

direction of architect Charles Texier, who surveyed many of the monuments but concentrated his energy on the Akropolis.<sup>11</sup> With the help of French sailors, Texier dislodged the row of capitals Hunt had described and he exposed the stylobate along one of the flanks. His excavations revealed several sculptures that had not been described by earlier travelers, including a lion bringing down a bull (A9), a lion crushing a doe (A11), a fragmentary centaur (part of A8), metopes depicting a boar (M6) and a galloping centaur (M7) and, most helpfully, the right fragment of the relief with fleeing women, which showed the figures to be Herakles wrestling a merman (A3).

The anticipated compensation for their efforts at Assos was the acquisition of key works for the French national collection. Following Texier's excavations, the French scholar Désiré Raoul-Rochette received permission from Sultan Mahmud II to remove one capital and the thirteen known sculptured blocks to the Musée du Louvre aboard the French brig *La Surprise* in 1838. Unfortunately, these blocks were sawed off to a thickness of 0.15 m., to be mounted on the walls of the Louvre, thus destroying architectural evidence crucial for the building's construction.

Texier identified and drew various parts of the temple, but neither his measurements nor his reconstruction reflect careful scrutiny of the evidence. He modeled the facade on the well-known temple called the Basilica at Paestum, understanding it to be of the same vintage.

Despite his claim for the logic of Greek architecture, the reconstruction Texier published in 1849 was the first to demonstrate visually the most illogical aspect of the temple's design—that the large sculptured reliefs belonged to the exterior epistyle of the temple. In attempting to reconstruct the building, he had to confront the essential issue that his predecessors avoided. The fact that the normally unembellished, architectonic zone of the epistyle was encumbered with decoration was so extraordinary to Texier that he urged the Académie des Beaux-arts to form a commission to examine the matter. Nothing came to pass.

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<sup>11</sup> Texier 1849, 193-207.

But the issue at stake—the decoration of a structurally functioning member—made the temple notorious. The contested territory shifted from the subject of the reliefs to their architectural disposition.

After the French excavations, Assos, newly exposed, fell victim to construction projects in Istanbul. Large parts of the walls, city gates, gymnasium, and theatre disappeared into the docks of the arsenal in 1864. The French stopped the plunder, but no one was available to make good on their claim to all further discoveries of ancient art at Assos.

Assos was ripe for the picking when in 1879 Francis (Frank) Henry Bacon and Joseph Thatcher Clarke, then penniless young architects, sailed to the site in a 20-foot sloop christened the *Dorian* (fig. 2). Their description of Assos and its opportunities captivated the founders of the newly formed Archaeological Institute of America, especially Charles Eliot Norton, professor of classics at Harvard, who keenly felt the lack of American presence in the archaeological arena. The Americans launched their expedition to Assos during the golden years of large-scale archaeology in the Mediterranean. Discussions of the theoretical underpinnings of Greek architecture, fueled by Gottfried Semper's work on color and Karl Friedrich Schinkel's on form, dominated the *École de Beaux Arts* and German intellectual circles, and Norton's protégé, Joseph Thatcher Clarke, saw in Assos the opportunity to explore ideas on the formation of the Doric order. He was appointed director. Frank Bacon traveled as draftsman but held every part of the project together both in the field and through its final publication. They worked at the site from 1881 to 1883, with a small team including, in 1881, architects Charles H. Walker and Maxwell Wrigley, geologist Joseph S. Diller, photographer John Henry Haynes, and student volunteers Charles W. Bradley, William C. Lawton, Elliot Norton, and Edward Robinson. In 1882, architect Robert Koldewey and

epigrapher John R. S. Sterret joined the team. Susan Heuck Allen has vividly chronicled the trials and triumphs of this first expedition of the Archaeological Institute of America.<sup>12</sup>

Frank Bacon was in charge of the survey and persevered with masterful and accurate renderings of an enormous territory. His drawings, a centerpiece of this exhibition, are remarkable for their topographic scope, archaeological specificity, and at times intimate expression. His signature drawing of the plan of the ancient city captures the rugged landscape and the deployment of buildings. The splendid bird's eye perspective drawing of the agora he and Koldewey made has become a staple in all handbooks on the development of urban space; equally admirable are the careful actual state plans and sections upon which it is based. Bacon advocated drawing details at full scale, and we see his thinking in the several drawings of capitals, geisons, and simas from each of the buildings he examined at Assos.<sup>13</sup> Photographs by Henry Haynes provide an excellent counterpoint between the actual state of the ruins and their reconstruction, as seen in the pair of images of the Heroon and South Stoa.

Criticisms that the young team did not do more or that they had in some way failed because they did not expose any domestic architecture are ludicrous when one considers just how much they excavated, surveyed, drew, and reconstructed in their two and a half seasons.<sup>14</sup> Largely through Bacon's efforts, they gave pictorial form to Leake's claim that Assos gives the most perfect idea of a Greek city.

Joseph Thatcher Clarke was the designated leader of the excavation and its scholarly voice from the field. His assessment of previous scholarship on the site, especially regarding the temple, is strident. He criticized Texier's "genius for inexactitude":

Texier's detailed topographical plan of the city is hardly creditable as a sketch from memory. The given measurements, though expressed in the smallest fractions of the metric system, are often wholly fictitious, the restorations largely imaginary. Even were the present expedition to do no more than accurately to determine the points treated with such unworthy carelessness by

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<sup>12</sup> Allen 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Dinsmoor 1940.

<sup>14</sup> Allen 2002.

Texier, it would render a definite and valuable service to archaeological science.<sup>15</sup>

Clarke was first intrigued, then consumed, and ultimately we may even say obsessed, with the temple. He focussed his energy there, leaving Bacon to manage all the rest. Clarke has come under considerable criticism, quite justified, for his mishandling of the American venture.<sup>16</sup> He stands accused of misappropriation of funds, dereliction of duty, incompetence, and imperiousness. He put the health of his team at risk, and his misdeeds surely cost the Americans architectural and metrological finds of great importance that are today lost.

But despite all of this, I maintain a modicum of sympathy for Clarke. He liked the Temple of Athena. His work brought to light several additional reliefs that helped to make sense of those known at the beginning of the century. He made a concerted effort to fit all of the now many reliefs into their architectural frame and he produced a creditable reconstruction based on careful scrutiny of architectural as well as sculptural evidence. He argued to situate the temple positively amid the acknowledged paradigms of classical architecture, particularly the Hephaisteion in Athens. He presented the first comparative account of the iconography of the sculpture and sought to make sense of it in a coherent and programmatic way.<sup>17</sup>

Clarke's respect for the integrity of the temple was not shared by his immediate successor. Charles Elliot Norton assigned his youngest son the task of publishing the new fragments of sculptured relief that appeared after the excavations. Even as he did so, Richard Norton leveled the harshest criticisms against the building and in the process condemned all of Asia Minor:

What the position of these sculptures does show is that the Asiatic Greeks did not understand the use of sculpture for architectural decoration. The work of the sculptors at Ephesus shows the same misconception, and from this early time down to the very end, Asiatic sculptors continued to make the same mistake. . . . The sculptures are

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<sup>15</sup> Clarke 1882, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Allen 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Clarke 1885; Clarke 1898; Clarke, Bacon and Koldewey 1902-1921, 139-69.

not beautiful; they are not even of very deep interest. . . They are the work of a provincial school in a country where the Fine Arts never attained their noblest development. They emphasize, however, the inimitable quality of the work of Greece proper, showing, as only contrasts can show, the superb attainments of the Grecian sculptors and how widely-spread and civilizing their influence was.<sup>18</sup>

Such sweeping and ethnically pejorative criticism makes us cringe today, but the core issue, the misappropriation of sculptural decoration, has pursued the temple well into the late twentieth century. Broad-minded scholars such as Gottfried Gruben described the temple as “a provincial building thrown together without understanding.”<sup>19</sup> Martin Robertson dismissed it as “an experiment happily not often repeated.”<sup>20</sup> With the postmodern movement in architecture, the vice grip in which modernism once held Greek architecture has loosened, and further discoveries across the ancient Greek world underscore a diversity of expression of which the temple at Assos was an exuberant part. And now in the twenty-first century, Tonio Hölscher has raised concerns about the integration of Greek architecture and its sculpture that have interesting implications for the temple at Assos.<sup>21</sup> Hölscher proposes that the restriction of Greek architectural sculpture to the non-tectonic elements of a building, well above eye-level and sometimes in obscured settings, necessarily limits the viewer’s ability for sustained engagement required to communicate intensified messages. Can the same be said for the Temple at Assos, where the designers did not confine themselves to a “tectonic” disposition of the sculpture but instead chose to adorn the largest, most visible, unobstructed surface of the epistyle? Can they receive some positive credit for placing visual communication at the forefront of their enterprise?

One way to find out, radical to be sure, would be to rebuild this most curious monument. An attempt was made in the late 1980s, but the project proved more challenging than anticipated and some of the choices made were more hindering than helpful to our

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<sup>18</sup> Norton 1897.

<sup>19</sup> Gruben 2001, 402.

<sup>20</sup> Robertson 1975, 88.

<sup>21</sup> Hölscher 2009.

understanding. In 2008 the Archaeological Institute of America once again intervened at Assos to help a new team of Turkish and German archaeologists make a fresh attempt. The temple may this time cooperate, but the building has tended, over the centuries that we have attempted its recovery, to go its own, elusive way.

In closing I would like to offer a coda on the impact nineteenth-century attempts to recover Assos had on American architecture. The team sent to Assos set out to explore Greek architecture and culture, to establish a foothold for American scholars in the Mediterranean, and to build the ancient collections of American museums. Their choice of Assos was both expedient and promising. Their effort was imperfect. But they were very young—most not out of their 20s—and life could take remarkable turns. So it must have been for the young Frank Bacon, who, on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1883, organized a momentous journey up Mt. Ida by moonlight with Alice, Laura, and Edith Calvert, nieces of Frank Calvert, American attaché to the Dardanelles, owner of part of the land upon which Troy stands, and friend to the American expedition. In his journal, Bacon describes the adventure, during which Alice reinjured a bad ankle and nearly collapsed. The entry closes with their safe return, and then skips ahead to preparations for a wedding in the Crimean Memorial Church in Istanbul. Although he returned to America, Bacon's marriage to Alice Calvert tied him irrevocably to the Troad, where his wife was happiest.

That might be the end of our story except that Frank Bacon had a younger brother, Henry, also an architect, who married another Calvert sister, Laura. Frank introduced his younger brother to ancient Greek architecture through his work at Assos, and Henry helped Frank complete the drawings from the Street of the Tombs, especially the Publius Varius Monument (fig. 3). While the strange and wonderful temple was not recreated, hints of other Assian monuments from the Agora and Street of the Tombs found their way into various of Henry Bacon's designs. We find elements of the exedrae from the Street of the Tombs in Bacon's memorial to the Melvin Brothers in the Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord,

Massachusetts (fig. 4). There are echoes of the Heroon in the Mausoleum of Marcus A. Hanna in Cleveland Ohio (fig. 5).

While we cannot make a precise correlation between the buildings of Assos and Henry Bacon's most famous commission, the Lincoln Memorial, we cannot fail to appreciate the memorial's purely Greek demeanor (fig. 6). To those who commissioned the monument, the memorial was to be a symbol of the rebuilt nation, the third element anchoring the Washington Mall at its western end. Many wondered why classical architecture should be the language of American reunification (not to mention emancipation), but Bacon persevered and his design prevailed.<sup>22</sup> The conservative-minded found in it the language of commerce and government, cornerstones of the western civilization rooted in the classical tradition. But ultimately the more powerful message of the monument centered on freedom, which redeemed for Greek architecture in America a very different vision. Denied the right to sing at Constitution Hall, Marion Anderson took her concert to the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939. As the backdrop for the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King's transforming "I have a Dream" speech, the fate of the monument was sealed. Since then, the classically designed Lincoln Memorial has served as the venue for pivotal American statements about race, equality, and opportunity. In recovering the past, we create extraordinary new futures.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas 2002; for a polemic view see Boime 1998, 253-306.

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### Illustrations

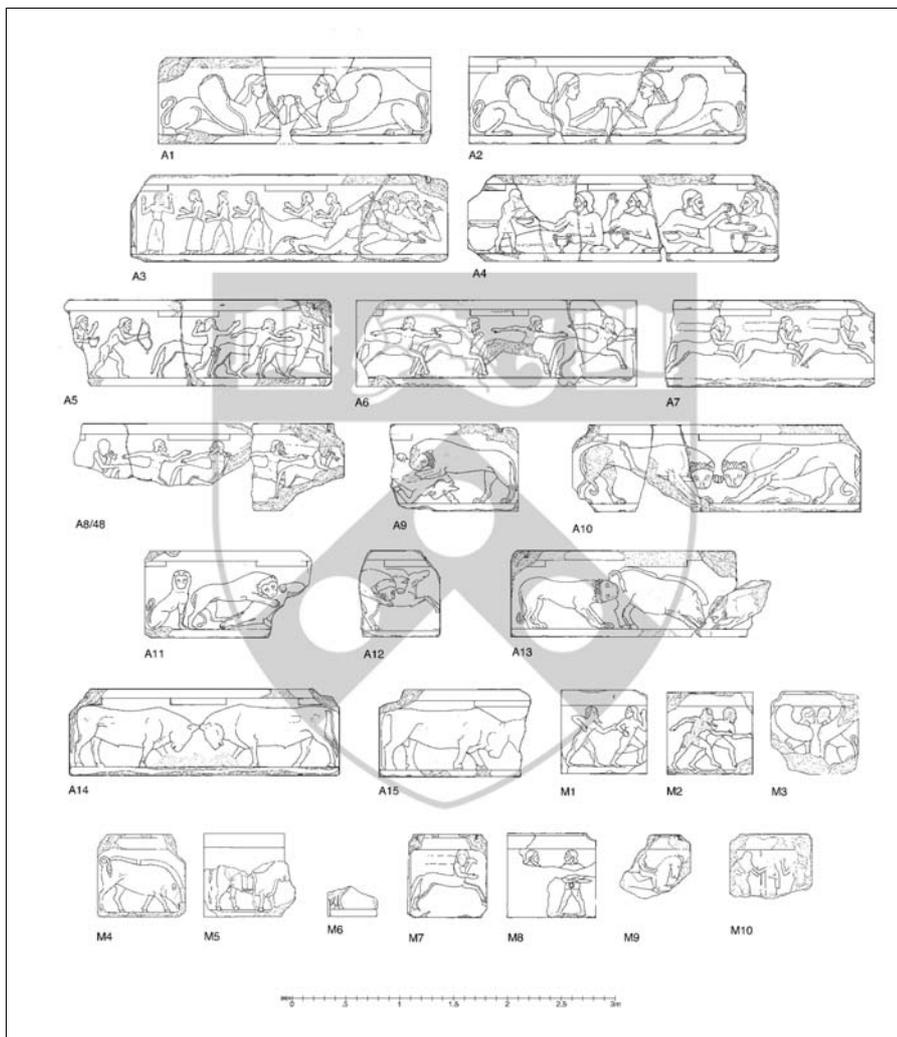


figure 1: Reliefs from the Temple of Athena at Assos; drawing Bonna D. Wescoat.



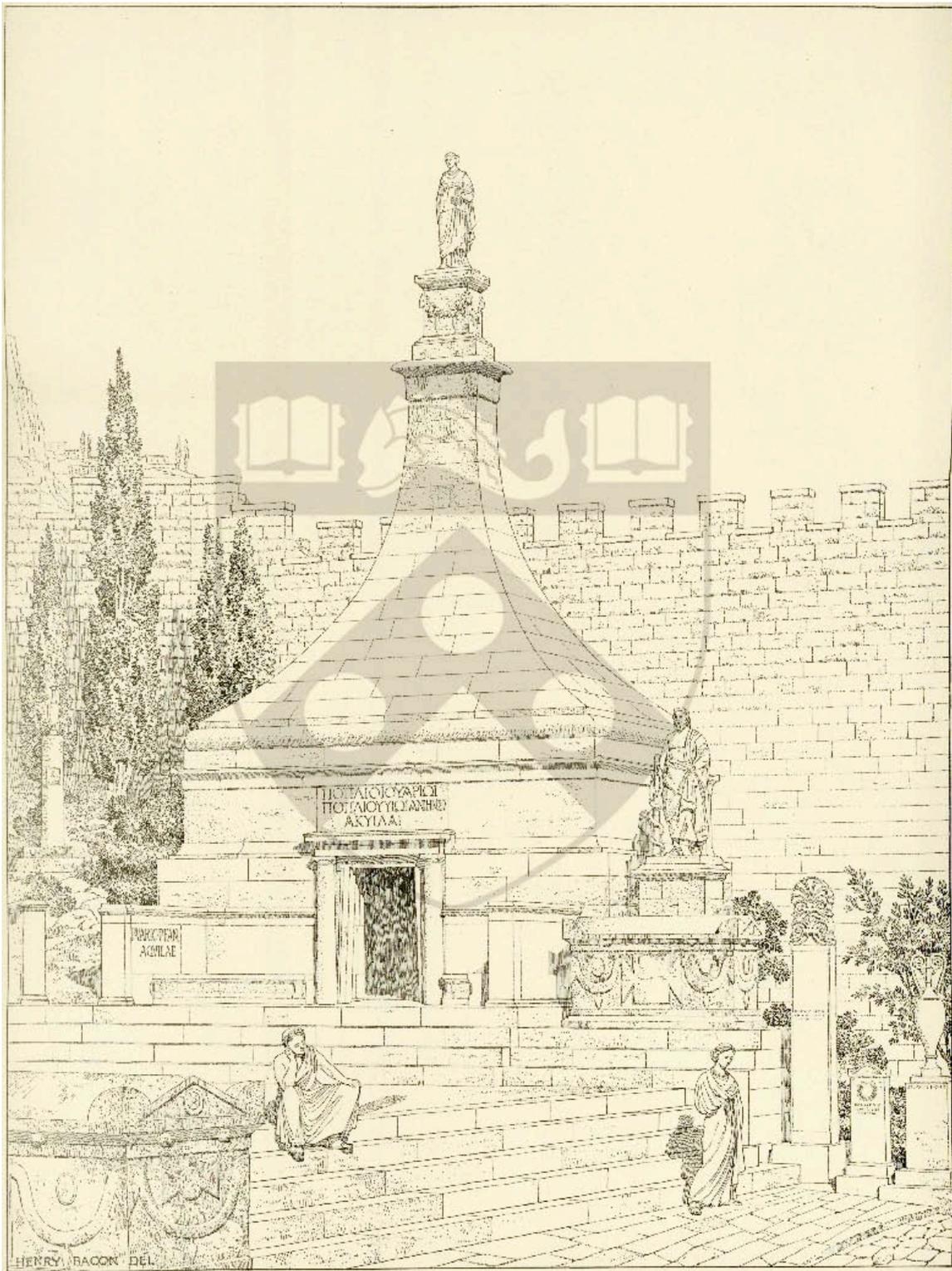


figure 3: Drawing of the Tomb of Publius Varius by Henry Francis Bacon, published in Clarke, Bacon, and Koldewey, p. 229.

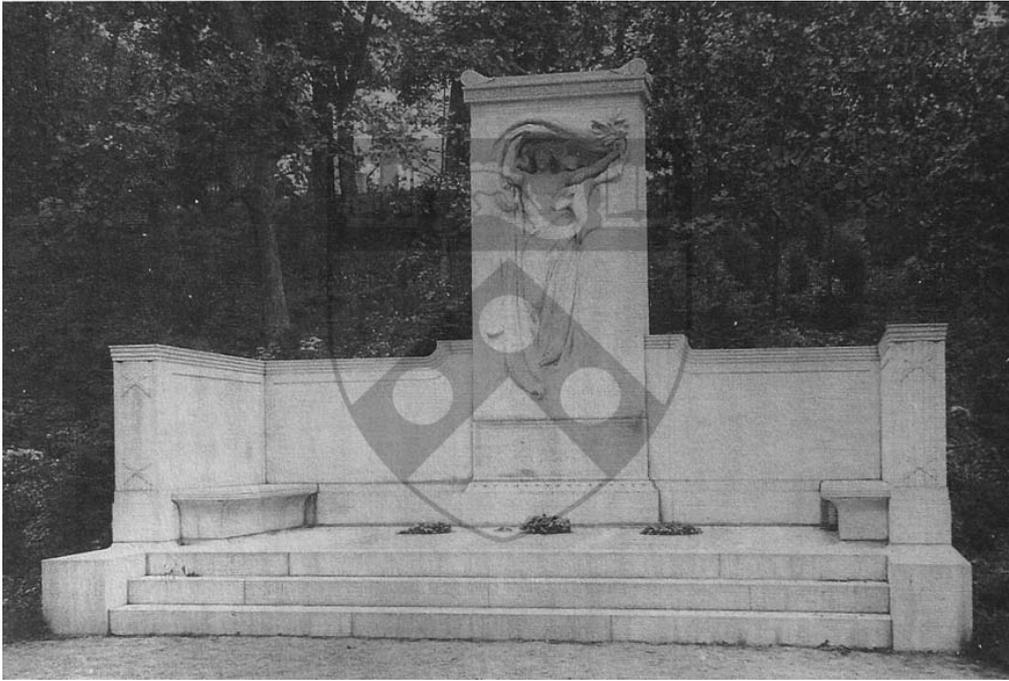


figure 4: Henry Bacon (architect) and Daniel Chester French (sculptor). Memorial to the Melvin brothers, Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Concord, Massachusetts. Henry Bacon Collection, Wesleyan University Library, Special Collections and Archives.



figure 5: Henry Francis Bacon, architect. Mausoleum of Marcus A. Hanna, Lake View Cemetery, Cleveland, Ohio, 1906. Henry Bacon Collection, Wesleyan University Library, Special Collections and Archives.



figure 6: Lincoln Memorial, Washington, DC. Wikimedia Commons; author, [UpstateNYer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:UpstateNYer); <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:UpstateNYer>; [CC-BY-SA-3.0/UpstateNYer](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/) at Wikipedia.